

Part One:

the invitation to rest

Chapter 1

Messed Up Boxes

As humans, we love putting things in boxes. Organising things so that they are neat and distinct. Our box marked “rest” might contain: a lie-in, watching TV, reading a trashy novel, having some time off... those kinds of things. Meanwhile our box marked “worship” may hold: singing, church services, prayer, liturgy... religious or “spiritual” sounding things.

In the last few years, we - Sara and Sam - have found God messing up our boxes. Sometimes it feels as if God is like a toddler who has got into the cereal cupboard. Suddenly the Cheerios, granola and Weetabix are all on the floor mixed together. It’s hard to tell where one ends and the other begins.

Rest and worship are not exactly the same things, but the areas of overlap are far bigger than we had ever imagined. Rather than starting with a logical explanation of what we mean, we’re going to try and paint three word pictures that might help you experience what rest as worship feels like.

The first picture: Sara comes from Sweden. The winters there are long, dark and cold, and come February or March, our bodies and souls begin to crave the sunlight as our D-vitamin stores are depleted. Even if you're from sunny old England you might relate to this feeling. Then comes the day when the world seems lighter than the day before, and someone says in shock "it's actually quite warm out there". And so you hurry outside and simply turn your face into the sunshine. You don't need to talk about it, explain to the sun what you need from it - nothing is asked of you in that moment. You simply follow the deep longing in your body and soul and place yourself where that longing can be met. Perhaps rest, and worship, are God's invitation to follow the deep longing in your body and soul, to place yourself where he can meet that need.

Or, let's try another picture: My friend was staying over in our house with her 2-year old. I so enjoyed hanging out with this little kid - there were abundant giggles and jokes, great picture books were shared and I constantly marvelled at the songs and ideas that came out of this tiny, cute human being. On the last day, he had just woken up from his afternoon nap and his mother had plonked him on our sofa while getting on with packing her bags. I thought I ought to help with childcare and so sat down next to him, waiting to see what kind of activity he'd initiate. But, perhaps because he was still sleepy and there was nothing either of us really needed to do in that moment, we just sat there. No chats, no jokes, no whining, no food requests, no stories required. My big grown-up body next to his tiny and warm little-boy body, simply sitting there in peace. And I just knew in that moment that

this is how my Father God likes being with me, too. He likes my funny antics and when I try my best to use my gifts and when I get on with his other children. But I think he loves it when I just sit in his presence, no striving, no requests, no string of carefully curated words. Just my heart at rest, in a state of worship, right near to his Father-heart.

A final image: think about the love between two people. In any relationship, learning to communicate is crucial. We each express and receive love in different ways - for some, a thoughtful gift expresses love while it leaves others cold, and so on. We need to get to know each other to know how the other person best receives love. But crucially, *the gift is not the love*, it's a sign pointing towards the love. The spoken words "I love you" communicate *something* of the love, but it's not *the* love; at the end of the day, they are just words. It's the same with worship - all the activities of worship are good, but they are only signs pointing towards the worship. The worship is not the work we do, the words we say, the gifts we offer - worship is a state that our hearts are in. When we rest, we become most aware of the state of our hearts, most able to offer that unadorned gift of our presence and attention to the God who loves us.

You are not a device

Most books about rest start with a burn-out story. "I was a driven, successful, Type-A leader / professional / artist / human. I burned out and this is my story of recovery."

If you're burned out or feeling close to it; pull up a sofa, you're so welcome. But rest is not only about rehabilitating the broken, or

recharging our dangerously depleted resources.

We all know that feeling: you glance at the battery icon on your phone, tablet or laptop, and it glares back at you with a red warning - battery low. Charge now! So you scurry around to find the right kind of cable to charge it up again, breathing a little deeper when it's back in that safe 100% place.

Our lives are so surrounded by technology that we assume that we, humans, are a bit like battery-driven devices. We expend our energy, not stopping until we get a red warning light (dropping off to sleep at the wheel, snapping at our loved ones, yawning uncontrollably during an important meeting, or more serious symptoms of exhaustion). Only then do we think to rest, or we might say “recharge”. We think that a few extra hours in bed, or a box-set binge, or a spa weekend will refill our energy tank and set us off going again.

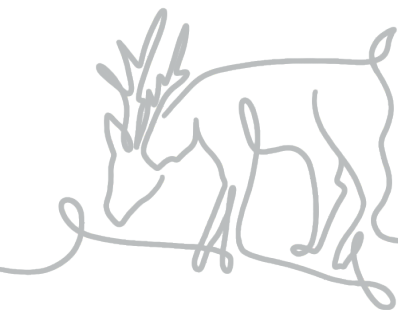
The problem is, you and I are not devices. We're not battery-driven technology. We are humans. We survive on more than bread, water and sleep alone. Rest is not simply a time to regain our energy, but the invitation to be *restored*, to be renewed, to be fundamentally changed from the inside out. It's an invitation into a deeper relationship with Jesus.

Reflect:

As you begin this journey, spend some time with the words on the next page from Christian medical doctor, Sandra Dalton-Smith.¹

¹ Sandra Dalton-Smith MD, *Sacred Rest*, (Faith Words, 2017) page 109-110.

“It is time to go back to the beginning when rest was required, when rest was sacred. When quietness was not a weakness and trust was not something to fear. Where we saw them for what they are, needed ingredients of a life worth living. Return to rest, quietness, and truth as a deer returns to a stream. Return to the source of your strength, and in doing so, you will be saved. Rest is salvation.”



Sandra Dalton-Smith, Sacred Rest

Chapter 2

Our Story

Everyone has a lockdown story, and each story is different, but they all involve some level of upheaval, disruption, and re-assessment of life. When the COVID-19 pandemic shut down the UK in March 2020, our work with Engage Worship changed overnight. Suddenly all our training events and live worship services were cancelled. But we quickly discovered that churches were hungry for the kinds of resources we could provide for them online - family prayer ideas, video worship songs and reflective things which could be done in the home and over Zoom. We threw ourselves into creating more of these kinds of things. This then transitioned into another busy period of writing and producing six different resource books in just under two years.

As we in Engage Worship were finishing up the last of our six books in 2021, we gathered with our colleagues and trustees to pray and seek God for what was next. The only word that came through clearly to all of us was simply: *rest*. This seemed counterintuitive - now was a time when churches were getting

back into meeting together. Shouldn't we focus on live training events? More new resources? Innovative projects?

As much as we tried, we couldn't shake the idea of "rest" out of our heads. We started reading all kinds of books on themes like rest, fun, play, and contemplative spirituality. We began reflecting on how rest was perhaps the missing piece in how churches approach gathered worship. But most of all, our gracious God was whispering in our ears: "Sara and Sam - *rest*. Don't just read about rest, think about rest, create resources around rest. I'm inviting you to *find rest*."

As it turned out, we really needed that rest. Not because we were burned out or dangerously tired, but because in responding to God's invitation to rest we met with Jesus again. He began to strip away all the things we thought were so important (even things like leading worship, creating resources and writing songs), and point us towards the abundant life all around us. His gentle, kind love began to transform us from the inside out, reminding us who we truly are.

St Luke's Story

Remember back in Lockdown One when walks were our only social events? Early in the pandemic, Sam went on a walk with our friend, Revd Grace Sentamu Baverstock. It was quite a long walk and at one point they nearly got lost on a golf course. They chatted about worship, and how the disruption of COVID-19 was giving churches a chance to pause and reassess. Grace shared that she felt her church and her services had been too busy, too packed with activity. She was inspired by the way that simplified

online services were connecting with her congregation, and they wondered aloud how churches could reimagine worship in a post COVID-19 world. This conversation led to a podcast, *Disrupting Worship*, where we chatted to worship leaders and pastors about what God might be saying to his church during this season.¹

Around Easter 2022 we ended up joining Grace's church, St Luke's Legrave. As the world gingerly emerged from lockdown, she had been putting a lot of our musings from the walks and the podcast into action. All of the services were radically shorter. The rotas were mostly scrapped but a wider range of people were being involved in leadership. Activity was limited to the bare essentials. She was prioritising rest, recovery and her relationship with God, and encouraging the congregation to do the same. And yet, remarkably, as the church focused on simplicity and rest, attendance on Sundays was growing in ways that the fellowship hadn't seen in years. As regular and active members of this church, we are now seeing the fruit of rest in worship right before our eyes.²

Reading this book

We've written this book with the aim that anyone can read it, at whatever pace works for you. There are 40 short chapters which means you could read it daily during Lent. Alternatively, feel free to dip in more sporadically at other times of the year, or binge the whole lot in a weekend!

1 engageworship.org/disrupting-worship

2 We unpack our experience at St Luke's further in Chapter 35.

Some of you are reading this book as pastors or worship leaders. We think that the gift of rest has very practical applications for church life, in particular how we organise, plan and lead restful gathered worship. Part 4 of this book will start to unpack some of these ideas. Our *Leaders' Resource eBook*³ will provide you with more concrete ideas and suggestions that you can adapt for your church context and also contains an outline for running a six week *The Rest Is Worship* series in your services. However, you may want to resist the temptation to skip to those parts first.

When you get on an aeroplane, the safety announcement reminds you “In the unlikely event of a sudden loss of cabin pressure, oxygen masks will drop down from the panel above your head... secure your own mask before attending to others”. This is the truth we’ve been learning slowly yet surely - if we want to lead others into the rest of God, we need to *fit our own masks first*. We need to enter into that rest for ourselves.

Before we can work out how to lead worship that is restful, God’s rest needs to permeate our existence, impacting how we wake up in the morning, how we live with our families and friends, how we approach work and voluntary roles, how we think about holidays and time off. It touches on tender subjects such as how we feel about being alone, how we feel about ourselves when we’re not being “useful”, our comfort levels with silence, and how we deal with those awkward thoughts and emotions which surface when we’re not being busy in order to ignore them.

3 engageworship.org/RestLeaders

Part 1 of this book explores God's *Invitation To Rest*. What is this gift Jesus is offering us, and how can our heart posture change towards being still? Part 2 focuses on *Rhythms Of Rest*, looking at how regular patterns of pausing can be incorporated into our daily, weekly and yearly cycles of work, family and other commitments. Part 3 delves into *A Restful Life*: what rest can look like in practice once we have paused, and how these restful activities are in themselves glorifying to God. Then Part 4 will address directly the subject of *Rest In Gathered Worship*: the invitation to a kind of church worship that includes more simplicity, stillness and receiving.

Treat this book as an invitation from Jesus to journey deeper into rest. As Ruth Haley Barton puts it:

“It is a winsome call from this intriguing person we call God - the One who loves us, the One who is inexplicably drawn to us, the One who knows so intimately what we need in order to be well. It is an invitation straight from the heart of Jesus to us.”⁴

As you read, try things out: new ways of praying, different rhythms for your day and week, fresh ways of looking at yourself, God, and the world around you. Deal with your own mask first - breathe deeply the life-giving breath of the Holy Spirit. Know the presence of Jesus, your Prince of Peace. Sit quietly beside the Father who loves you, and know that he receives your attention as worship.

4 Ruth Haley Barton, *Invitation to Retreat*, (InterVarsity Press, 2018) page 3.

Chapter 3

The Invitation

Imagine that you get a message like this from a close friend:

Hey!

You remember that house I've been working on? Guess what: it's all finished. The work is *done*. And if I say so myself, it's looking pretty amazing! Beautiful, practical, fully stocked up, everything we need for life in abundance. And now that I've finished all the work, I can begin the thing I made it for in the first place - enjoying it with the people I love.

So, I was wondering if you'd like to come and spend some time with me there? We can rest, have fun, be creative, enjoy the house, the garden, the lake, eat some great food... and you know, just *be* together for a bit. No stressy work, no striving, no burdensome responsibilities, no emails or social media...

Doesn't that sound good? Would you like that? Let me know, much love.

How would you feel about receiving that invitation - excited? Privileged? Blessed? Well, if that's the case, have you ever considered that this is the kind of invitation God has extended to *you*? That this is what God has in mind when he offers you the gift of rest?

In Genesis we read that God made a beautiful, abundant world. When he'd finished making it he began a day of rest (Gen 2:1-3), although not because he was exhausted - God doesn't get tired (Is 40:28). It is fair to surmise that he began that rest not for recovery but because he wanted to enjoy what he had made; he wanted to take pleasure in his creation. Notice too that this day doesn't end with "and there was evening, and there was morning", leading commentators to conclude that this day is an *eternal* day.¹ God invites the people that he made and loves to join him in that eternal rest; to enjoy the world in God's company. To just *be* with him. Forever.

Adam and Eve were created and invited to be with God in the garden, to live with him, to spend restful days with him. As Augustine expressed it in his *Confessions*: "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you."

In the gospels, Jesus invites us to "remain" or "abide" in him

1 FF Bruce, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Epistle to the Hebrews*, (Eerdmans, 1990) page 106; Ben Witherington III, *The Rest of Life*, (Eerdmans, 2012) page 4.

(John 15:4-7). Abide is a word related to “abode”: to make a home with. To truly worship God is to make our home in him, to spend our lives and our eternity responding to his offer of joyful, abundant relationship. Ben Quash writes in his book *Abiding*:

“Worship is being with God, and being with each other in being with God.”²

In worship it is God who invites and we who respond by choosing to abide, to be present with God and one another. The invitation before us is to come and enter into the rest God has provided for us - a lifetime and an eternity of truly *being* with him.

For many of us, this is what worship and Christian activities may have felt like in the early days of our faith. We may have read the Bible eager to spend time with its Author, unencumbered by the complexities of hermeneutics or ethics. We may have sung worship songs out of a desire simply to seek God’s presence rather than being concerned with how in-tune our music was. We may have engaged in church and ministry and creativity for the joy of expressing our faith with others, not out of obligation, ambition or expectation.

Somewhere along the line, however, striving creeps in. Good things (education, goals, other people’s opinions, paid roles, etc.) begin to nudge out this sense of restfully abiding in God’s presence. Worship and the Christian life become a place of striving. As Ruth Haley Barton puts it, the devotional life becomes “a tool to accomplish utilitarian purposes rather than experiencing them as

² Ben Quash, *Abiding*, (Bloomsbury Continuum, 2012) page 81.

a place of intimacy with God for my own soul's sake.”³

Rest is an invitation to turn from striving and come back to the heart of God. It's a gift of abiding in God. It's an opportunity to be in relationship with God, to simply *be* in his presence, enjoying the world and the people around us.

Make this prayer your own:

Creator God,
open my eyes to your invitation.
Show me what it means to rest in you,
to be with you,
to enjoy you and the world you made.
Amen.

3 Ruth Haley Barton, *Sacred Rhythms*, (InterVarsity Press, 2006) page 47.